

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

Robert Mapplethorpe

Eros and Order

4 June – 2 August, 2010. Gallery 5 (2^o floor)

Guest curator: Anne Tucker

Opening: Thursday, 3 June, 7 pm.

Special Press Opening: Thursday, 3 June, 5.30 pm.

Malba – Fundación Costantini is pleased to announce the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe. Eros and Order*, the first retrospective in Buenos Aires, showcasing works of Robert Mapplethorpe (Nueva York, 1946 – Boston, 1989) the most transgressive artist and visionary of contemporary photography. Curated by Anne Tucker, Chief Curator of Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the exhibition presents a selection of 130 works produced between 1975 and 1988, belonging to The Mapplethorpe Foundation of Nueva York, United States.

The exhibition include his famous series of floral still lifes, nudes of men and women, homoerotic and sadomasochistic images, portraits of artists and celebrities such as Patti Smith, Arnold Schwarzenegger, William Burroughs, Susan Sontag, Carolina Herrera, Louise Bourgeois, Andy Warhol, Annie Leibovitz and Cindy Sherman, among others, besides his famous self-portraits.

"Mapplethorpe's lasting influence will rest on the breadth and diversity of subjects on which he drew to build different series of pictures; on his going against the contemporary grain to make beautiful objects, particularly when he brought standards of beauty to subjects that many will not accept as beautiful; and on his insistence that each of his subjects is as valid a subject for art as any other. Thus, he refused to marginalize his photographs of gay men or of homoerotic life, particularly those of the sadomasochistic subculture", explains Anne Tucker in the curatorial essay of the show.

Robert Mapplethorpe is considered one of the most controversial photographers of the twentieth century. He was born and raised in Long Island (New York) and, after studying art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, he started working with Polaroid materials, creating intimate and unique prints of his friends and acquaintances: artists, musicians, porno stars and unknown characters who visited the most *underground* clubs of New York. In 1975, he acquired a Hasselblad camera, and henceforth he moved away from the "snapshot" style of the Polaroid toward the meticulously composed and controlled images, emphasizing the formal beauty of his compositions.

This exhibition concentrates on Mapplethorpe's mature works made after he switched from using a Polaroid camera to a Hasselblad in 1975. In keeping with his preferences, works from the different series are intertwined without respect for the type of subject matter or for when the pictures were made. *"Genres long established as acceptable to art—portraiture, still lifes, nudes, and flowers—are presented with his sex series so that each can lay equal claim to the audience's appreciation",* indicates Tucker.

Together with the exhibition, Malba edited a Spanish-English catalogue of 176 pages, introduced by Eduardo Costantini, Founder and President of Malba; the presentation of Michael Stout, President of the Mapplethorpe Foundation; an essay in charge of the curator Anne Tucker; a complete biography of the artist and also the reproductions of all the works shown at the exhibition.

The only precedent of an individual exhibition dedicated to Robert Mapplethorpe in Argentina is the one showed at the Galería Klemm on June 1992, presenting a selection of 24 photographs of flowers, portraits of body builder Lisa Lyon, self-portraits and black men nudes, property of the Robert Miller Gallery in New York. Once the exhibition finished, Federico Klemm bought some of the works, four of which are now exhibited at his foundation.

Self-taught photographer

Although Mapplethorpe controlled the photographic process from conception to presentation, he was reluctant to call himself a photographer. His ambitions were grander than that. When he began taking photographs in 1970, relatively few museums collected photographs, arts publications did not review them, there were only a handful of photograph collectors, and photographic sales were not regularly organized by the fine-arts auction houses.

By 1980, Mapplethorpe had evolved his own style and aesthetic path outside of the traditional photographic discussions and debates. *"Most of those who write best about Mapplethorpe's work do not come from the fine-art photography community, but are art curators, critics, poets, and novelists"*, says the curator. So, for instance, rather than discuss Mapplethorpe's predecessors as being the 1920s and 1930s photographers Edward Steichen and Edward Weston, they are more inclined to cite Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol. Others have reached back to antiquity, such as Germano Celant, art critic and senior curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, who proposed in 2004 a kinship between Mapplethorpe's photographs and classical art, in particular its manifestation in Flemish Mannerist engravings and sculpture.

Male nudes are the largest subject category in his oeuvre. Among his many figure studies —employing male models, friends, and lovers— are poses directly inspired by classical sculpture, even to the extent of putting a man on a wooden pedestal. Some of the strongest images in the series are interracial such as *Ken, Lydia and Tyler* (1985), which is his modern version of the three graces.

Another example is *Ken Moody/Robert Sherman* (1984) in which two bald heads— one black, one white, become negative and positive profiles. *"Mapplethorpe found black men to be erotically appealing, but he also loved the way their skin appeared in a black-and-white print. It could simulate the patina on a fine bronze sculpture"*, writes the curator.

Among his most frequently published and reproduced images are several of his many portraits of his friend, the poet and rock musician Patti Smith, including one from 1976 of a naked Smith holding onto a radiator that runs around an otherwise empty room. *"She simultaneously appears vulnerable and exudes tensile strength as she looks intently at Mapplethorpe"*, explains Tucker. A year earlier, Mapplethorpe had photographed Smith for her first album cover, for which she wore a white shirt and casually tossed a black jacket over her shoulder. Both the album *Horses* and the album cover are considered classics. Ex-lovers, Smith and Mapplethorpe remained friends, and he continued to create album covers for Smith as well as for other musicians, including Taj Mahal and Laurie Anderson.

Beauty of form

Mapplethorpe is particularly well known for his self-portraits. He created over one hundred of these images, the majority of which were made with his Polaroid cameras between 1970 and 1975. Yet, except for the last few images in the series, when he is also ravaged by illness as were so many of his friends before him, little is revealed about the man posed in front of the camera beyond the already public declaration that he is gay. More akin to his contemporary Cindy Sherman, Mapplethorpe is assuming readable guises, which may engage an audience without seriously exposing the subject.

"The earliest self-portrait in the exhibition was taken in 1975. The extended arm might be read as mimicking crucifixion, but his facial expression is one of self-confidence and pleasure, turning the outstretched arm to an expression of exuberance", analyses Tucker. Three years later, he placed a bullwhip into his anus and posed awkwardly looking over his shoulder at the camera while holding the whip's tail. This disconcerting, infamous image was included in the *X Portfolio*, which was released in 1978 with the *Y Portfolio* of flowers and objects.

In 1980, Mapplethorpe reconceived himself in two different series. In one, he is wearing lipstick, mascara, and probably blush to atypically project himself as feminine. In the other set, he plays the masculine side. He is dressed as he usually dressed, in a leather jacket, but in the picture, a cigarette hangs from his lips in a classic film-noir gesture. The androgyny is also expressed in Mapplethorpe's series of women body builders Lisa Lyon and Lydia Cheng.

Although he had photographed gay men in sexual acts from the beginning of his photographic career, his merging of the sexually violent S&M subculture with his mature style created an original and lasting idea. *"He created a style unabashedly committed to beauty in form and in craft, and brought that style to a subject previously considered unfit for the light of day, much less for the hallowed halls of art museums. While shocking the public in order to sensitize them to gay issues was one of Mapplethorpe's primary goals, he also believed in the beauty to be found in these most unexpected moments and body parts",* says the curator.

Polemic and popular

The issue of power is at the heart of the sex series, but also running through other series. Critic Germano Celant observed that Mapplethorpe brought out the exchange of power in unexpected ways. He could embody strength and power where one might expect fragility, such as in his photographs of flowers. *"The capacity of Mapplethorpe's works to continue to appeal to wide audiences while simultaneously evoking controversy speaks also of power—the power of the works to disturb and engage the viewer",* explains Tucker.

Robert Mapplethorpe died in 1989 at age 42. Since that time, his works have been exhibited and published widely throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia, with essayists taking several basic approaches in evaluating his importance from different theoretical points of view.

"Mapplethorpe was an ambitious artist, in the best sense, who strove not only for recognition and commercial success but a lasting legacy (...) His life as well as his art directly and indirectly reflected important political and social issues in the two decades in which he worked, but that his aesthetic was antithetical to the art of those same two decades; and finally, that while shock was not a reaction he sought in producing his work, he did not flinch from the effect of his homoerotic photographs on audiences", ends the curator.

Biography

Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989)

Robert Mapplethorpe was born to a lower middle class, Roman Catholic family in Queens, New York. He attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he studied painting and sculpture. In 1967, he met Patti Smith, a poet and future rock singer with whom he would live for the next five years, first as a partner, and later as friends. They encouraged and challenged each other's explorations in art. In 1970, Mapplethorpe began to work with Polaroid cameras, initiating a six-year period (1970-1975) during which he produced over 1,500 Polaroid photographs, mostly in black and white. During this time, he began taking self-portraits, a practice that would continue throughout his life. He also frequently photographed Patti Smith and his homosexual lovers, as well as casual acquaintances, male and female nudes, and objects as still lifes. During the Polaroid years, Mapplethorpe was learning his craft, experimenting with camera angles, depth of field and framing.

In 1972, Mapplethorpe met Sam Wagstaff, who would become his lover, mentor and benefactor as well as a frequent subject of his Polaroid photographs. The two men also shared a passion for collecting photographs and beautiful objects. Wagstaff first purchased a loft on Bond Street for Mapplethorpe, and later helped him purchase another loft which served as both his residence and studio. He kept the space on Bond Street as his darkroom and office. Wagstaff's patronage, if not their love affair, lasted until Wagstaff's death from AIDS in 1987.

In 1975, the Polaroid camera was replaced with a Hasselblad camera, with which Mapplethorpe began to develop his mature refined style. The adamantly formal work was cooler and more graphic than his Polaroid photographs. Mapplethorpe was eventually able to afford assistants to help him further his work with flowers, still lifes of objects and sculptures, classical nudes, and portraits of a wide circle of friends and acquaintances as well as of pornographic film stars and members of the S&M underground. In 1980, he met Lisa Lyon, the first World Women's Bodybuilding Champion. Over the next several years they collaborated on a series of portraits and figure studies, a film, and the book, *Lady, Lisa Lyon*. In the 1980s, portraiture would become a central focus of Mapplethorpe's career and his primary means of earning a living.

Starting in 1977, a year after switching to the Hasselblad camera, Mapplethorpe exhibited his work with increasing regularity in the United States. In the 1980s, he also began to exhibit and publish his photographs in Europe and in Japan. After 1983, numerous monographs and catalogues of his work appeared with essays by major curators, critics, and literary figures. In 1986, Mapplethorpe was diagnosed with AIDS. In 1988, his first American retrospective was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. He died on March 9, 1989.

CV

Anne Tucker

Since 1976, Anne Wilkes Tucker has been the curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, building the museum's collection to include 26,000 photographs. She has curated over 40 photographic exhibitions, including broad surveys such as *The History of Japanese Photography* as well as retrospectives and mid-career surveys for artists, including Robert Frank, Brassai, Richard Misrach, and Ray K. Metzker. She has curated three shows about Argentine photography.

General Information

Robert Mapplethorpe. Eros and Order

Date: June 4 – August 2, 2010

Opening Hours: 12 am – 8 pm (Wednesday till 9 pm)

Closed on Tuesdays

Place: Malba, Gallery 5

Guides Visits in Spanish: Wednesday and Fridays at 5 pm. Sundays at 8 pm

Special guided tours in English. Info and reservations at educacion@malba.org.ar

Address: Avda. Figueroa Alcorta 3415, Buenos Aires

Tel: +54 4808 6500 | info@malba.org.ar | www.malba.org.ar |

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For further information please contact Guadalupe Requena at grequena@malba.org.ar | T +54 (11) 4808 6507 | prensa@malba.org.ar

Malba – Fundación Costantini | Avda. Figueroa Alcorta 3415 | C1425CLA | Buenos Aires, Argentina | T +54 (11) 4808 6500 | F +54 (11) 4808 6598/99 | info@malba.org.ar | www.malba.org.ar | * Request images in hi-res.